

Exploring Conflict and Story Structure

Name: _____

Date: _____

CONFLICT

All stories are built on **conflict**. It provides the central source of tension and drama that make stories interesting to read.

The story problem To figure out the main conflict in a story, try to state the central problem of the story in one sentence. (E.g., Jack London's "To Build a Fire" is a story about a man's desperate struggle to keep himself alive in the wilderness.)

Categories of conflict Conflict in stories often falls into one of four major categories:

- **Character vs. character** involves conflicts between people—such as family conflict, trouble with a bully, difficulties in romance, etc.
- **Character vs. society** involves conflict between an individual and larger groups—such as the outsider in a strange culture, a poor character's struggle to "make it" in the business world, etc.
- **Character vs. nature** involves conflict between an individual and the natural world—such as fighting a powerful hurricane, surviving after a plane crash in the desert, etc.
- **Character vs. self** involves characters' psychological conflicts with themselves—such as overcoming a drug habit or alcoholism, grieving over the loss of a loved one, etc.

STORY STRUCTURE

Story structure determines how authors present the story conflict to their readers. Many traditional story structures include these four elements:

- **Exposition** This introduces background material about the characters, setting, and dramatic situation—such as when a character writes a letter home to tell his family (and the reader!) everything that has happened in the past month.
- **Complication** The author presents obstacles that increase the tension of the story conflict—such as when the heroine's long-lost, first true love shows up unexpectedly on the day she is to be married to another man.
- **Climax** The moment when the action comes to its highest point of dramatic conflict—such as when the "good guy" and the "bad guy" in a Western finally come to a showdown in the town square.
- **Resolution** This tells how the story concludes following the climax—such as in a science-fiction story that tells what happens *after* the space invaders have returned to their own planet.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:

1. Can you state the central problem of the story? Does the story conflict fit one of the four traditional story conflict categories?
2. In the story structure, can you locate the exposition? complication? climax? resolution?